

10.07.2021

US DISTRICT JUDGE WILLIAM M CONLEY
US DISTRICT COURT
WESTERN DISTRICT OF WISCONSIN
120 N HENRY ST SUITE 320
MADISON WI 53703

RE: Matthew Raymond Howard

Dear Honorable Judge Conley,

Since my last letter to you regarding my son, Matthew Howard, my heart has been burdened questioning what additional information I could provide for a better understanding of Matthew's disabilities and his past actions. Matt has participated in research and received services at the Waisman Center periodically for twelve years so I reached out to them about their Outreach Programs. There is a Senior Psychologist there, Dr. Megan Farley, who provides evaluations of persons on the spectrum in an effort to help the judicial system understand a person's abilities and disabilities, framing the situation in terms of what is known about autism and how the disability impacted the situation.

I truly hoped I would be able to coordinate this evaluation prior to Matt's sentencing. Since this will not be the case, perhaps you will provide me with the opportunity to share the following excerpt on the vulnerabilities of people with autism and pornography addiction. This article was published by The Reward Foundation which focuses on the impact of mental and physical health, relationships, attainment and criminality relative to internet pornography.

"The internet can be a minefield. Many do not have friends and often lead isolated lives, so the internet provides solace. But their lack of social experiences or boundaries, and misinterpretation or literal, rigid interpretation of communications, coupled with obsessive behavior, often leads to them being charged with harassment offenses.

When someone on social media blocks or ends an online relationship, an autistic person often needs a detailed written explanation. Sending persistent messages seeking this can amount to an act of harassment.

Such cases should be diverted from the police and courts and dealt with by a referral to a knowledgeable psychologist. They could explain the inappropriateness of such behavior and the effect upon the recipient.

*Autistic people are also vulnerable to being charged with the possession of indecent images of children. Porn and autism can be a toxic combination. Many have never had any kind of relationship. Social isolation and an over-reliance on the internet to provide stimulation can lead to an addiction to pornography. Often immature, autistic people may find images of adult sexual activity distressing and will view sexual images of children to learn about sex **without** a particular sexual interest in children.*

*Young autistic people may commit sexual offenses against other children as they try to learn about sexual behavior. Such offenses are always very serious but the **defendant's condition should be given more weight** when considering culpability at the time of sentence.*

*Autistic offenders are **unlikely to go on to commit more serious physical offenses**. They are usually too afraid to have such physical contact and are **unlikely to be dangerous**.*

*Compulsory counseling? To prevent further such offending, these cases should be dealt with by the provision of **compulsory counseling by an autism specialist psychologist in the community rather than imprisonment.***"

Director of Autism Spectrum Diagnostics & Consulting, LLC, Dr. Mary Riggs-Cohen, is a skilled psychologist who has worked 30 years in the field and has specialized in the treatment of Asperger's Syndrome for 12 years. She states of individuals with ASD that their social naïveté and ineffective communication skills can lead to inappropriate behaviors. Dr. Riggs-Cohen then quotes another doctor, Dr. Richard Dowell, who states "ASD males are unable to engage peers in social (or sexual) relationships and as a result tend to drop down to younger individuals . . . they begin communicating with younger kids online, and begin looking at sexually explicit pictures of young girls and boys . . . many adult ASD individuals are drawn to younger people **because they feel that age emotionally** . . . due to their lack of social understanding and sexual instruction, are **unaware** of what constitutes child pornography and deviant sexual material."

This is an accurate depiction of Matt. He was constantly thrown in with kids much younger than him throughout his high school years. Matt kept being held back in high school, between two to three years, placing him in situations where he was next to "peers" with up to a seven-year age difference. At that time in his life he was emotionally much, much younger than his birth years.

In his school years Matt was extremely shy and socially isolated. The isolation was exasperated even more when he was homeschooled and underwent cancer treatments. He experienced weight gain and the loss of hair which impaired his self-image. Matt was angry, scared, depressed, and did not have the ability or an avenue to discuss his feelings openly. I had no idea he was experiencing those feelings.

His early sexual instruction was by two neighborhood boys under their guise of making Matt a "popular" kid. Matt has since shared with me the incidents and what they did. It was a cruel and despicable sexual introduction for Matt, a child who was naive and lacked sexual knowledge. Matt was acting out what these boys taught, not only in their physical behavior but also how he was emotionally treated.

Research has shown ASD and ADHD persons are more likely to be addicted to pornography because they cannot shift their attention away from one task to another as easily as someone else due to perseveration which is a symptom of frontal lobe issues. Hyperfocus in persons on the autism spectrum results in problems connecting different areas of their brain, leading to the inability to change their focus.

Dr. Riggs-Cohen also discusses obsessive compulsions, as in collecting large numbers of images, and sexual fetishes. In Matt this is evidenced by his OCD diagnosis in the form of hoarding and the collection of images. Scatolia (feces) can be an autistic behavior, as well as interoceptive problems in people with Sensory Integration Disorder. Since Matt has both diagnoses, scatophilia possibly could have existed. In any case, scatolia can be seen as a form of getting attention. I believe his subconscious mind was screaming for attention - he was isolated from people the majority of his school years. What child doesn't want attention, doesn't want to feel better about themselves? Yet Matt didn't have the tools to understand how to make life better. His disabilities impacted his involvement with child pornography.

There is so much research and court cases relative to defendants who are on the Autism Spectrum. Every research study I've read mentions a defendant's disabilities on the Autism Spectrum should be taken into consideration during sentencing, that it is unlikely they will repeat the offense or become dangerous, and that therapy is more effective than imprisonment.

There are also many articles stating how longer sentences become a hindrance on the disabled individual. Matt has been punished, especially dealing with the symptoms of the comorbid diagnosis of Sensory Integration Disorder. Dr. Nick Yachovich who has over 20 years experience providing psychological evaluations, conducted a psychosexual evaluation on Matt in February 2018. Dr. Yachovich concluded Matt does not fit the profile of one likely to engage in sexually criminal behavior; presents low risk for future offending; is able to learn from his errors and benefit from treatment. Dr. Yachovich also concludes what is also evidenced in the research on autism and porn addiction — incarceration should be taken into consideration that a longer sentence of time is **no** more likely to be rehabilitative than a shorter sentence.

Your Honor, it is my hope you see Matt as a human being in which his disabilities played a major roll in his offense and this is given consideration at sentencing. In addition to asking for his release to appropriate psychotherapy, I ask consideration that Matt not be registered as a sex offender. Registration can have a particularly devastating effect on autistic people's lives as it further isolates and stigmatizes them, and limits their access to services and benefits.

I am confident he will not now or ever reach out and physically hurt a child. Emotionally he has matured and grown considerably. He is fully cognizant of what he has done and feels extreme remorse. Now is the time for Matt to receive therapy and obtain support to make his life meaningful, serve God, and have a successful life.

Respectfully,

Michelle Howard
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